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SUBJECT: TURKEY: PARTIES HUNT FOR VOTES FAR AFIELD

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[1](#)B. 08 ANKARA 2040
[1](#)C. ANKARA 83
[1](#)D. ANKARA 242

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: With just six weeks to go, Turkish political parties are ramping up their campaigns for March 29 local elections -- the first nationwide electoral test for AKP since its landslide victory in the July 2007 parliamentary elections. Both the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its main opponents view the election as a referendum on AKP's rule, and are scrambling to capture votes wherever they can. The parties' overtures to reach traditional opponents -- AKP courting staunchly secular Alevis and main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) courting Islamic fundamentalists -- are largely perceived by the public as insincere campaign gimmicks. But over time, these unorthodox steps will help soften the sharp ideological edges of political parties, hasten societal acceptance of marginal groups, and ultimately strengthen Turkish democracy.
End summary.

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Local Elections Take on Heightened Significance
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[1](#)2. (C) AKP Secretary General Idris Naim Sahin told us February 12 that AKP views the elections as a referendum on its local and national performance in the last five years. Sahin said elections are a chance to demonstrate that AKP represents all of Turkey and show that the public still maintains confidence in the AKP government. AKP receiving less than 40 percent of the vote would send a signal that the public has lost trust in AKP's ability to govern responsibly, according to Sahin. He said the party is therefore working overtime to improve on its result in 2004 local elections, when it won 42 percent. The party's primary campaign focus is explaining to the public the significant increase in municipal services -- roads, water, trash pick-up -- AKP has brought to all areas of Turkey during AKP rule. AKP's Konya Provincial chairman Faruk Dugen told us February 10 that AKP's successful track record and superior election organization would allow it to capture well over 40 percent of the vote nationwide, and win key areas it does not now control: Izmir, Diyarbakir, Eskisehir, and the Ankara sub-municipality Cankaya.

[1](#)3. (C) Osman Nuri Kocak, Republican People's Party (CHP) Provincial Chairman in the southwestern province of Karaman, told us February 11 that CHP also views the local elections

as a national referendum. Kocak said CHP would capitalize on issues that have both local and national import, such as the ailing economy and corruption, to significantly reduce AKP's take in 2004 local elections (44 percent) and 2007 elections (47 percent). He predicted that voters would "show AKP a yellow card" by giving them "well under 40 percent," increasing pressure for AKP to hold early general elections. Nationalist Action Party (MHP) MP Murat Sefkatli emphasized the same theme with us, insisting that a poor AKP showing would force the government to call early parliamentary elections.

Wooing Disparate Voters

¶4. (SBU) The import of the elections has led Turkish political parties to up the ante in their campaigns, by using new, frequently controversial, and at times possibly illegal, tactics to court voters outside of their traditional political bases. CHP, going one step beyond its November initiative to court pious voters by placing CHP party pins on fully veiled women (ref B), offered to establish weekly Koran training courses in CHP community centers. CHP Chairman Deniz Baykal told reporters February 3 that CHP was ready to respond to citizen requests to give children proper Koran education, as opposed to the teachings of religious sects that teach inaccurate interpretations of the Koran.

¶5. (C) AKP, meanwhile, is publicizing its achievements on the Kurdish issue, including the long-awaited January 1 launch of

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a Kurdish language channel on state-run TV (ref C). The party also is ramping up its Alevi outreach initiative, according to Reha Camaroglu, the Alevi-origin AKP MP who is leading the initiative. He told us February 9 that he is following up on the PM's December Iftar dinner for Alevis, a community that has traditionally supported staunchly secular CHP, by arranging for the PM to visit the mostly-Alevi city of Haci Bektas in the coming weeks. Camaroglu said Erdogan would visit an Alevi prayer house and meet with local Alevi leaders.

¶6. (SBU) Conservative-religious Saadet Party, the descendent of Necmettin Erbakan's Refah Party, is attempting to reach out to Turkey's cosmopolitan elite by nominating two non-headscarved female candidates for mayor of Ankara's Cankaya sub-province and Istanbul's Sisli sub-province, areas known as bastions of secularism. Nationalist Action Party (MHP) has continued its long-term rebranding project by putting forward polished, camera-friendly candidates instead of nationalist "gray wolf" firebrands.

Electoral Ploys or Genuine Outreach?

¶7. (C) Political parties are defending their own actions while labeling opponents' tactics disingenuous. CHP's Konya Provincial Chairman Imdat Sen told us February 10 that CHP's proposals for Koran courses were an attempt to have the state take back control of religion from "some powerful Islamic tarikat leaders who teach warped interpretations of the Koran and exploit religion for their own financial and sexual purposes." CHP's Karaman Provincial Chairman Osman Nuri Kocak told us CHP politicians merely wanted to break down barriers and demonstrate that CHP is not opposed to religion. Kocak said AKP's efforts, in contrast, were insincere. PM Erdogan's visits to cem houses were "window dressing" because Erdogan "ignores long-standing Alevi demands about eliminating compulsory religious education and the lack of legal recognition for cem houses." (NOTE: AKP's Camaroglu told us that he too remains skeptical about the PM's commitment to Alevi issues. END NOTE.) Kocak said AKP's "handouts" in Tunceli Province (ref D) were blatant attempts

to bribe Alevi voters." Pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) official Nazmi Gur told us that AKP was conducting "faux outreach" to Kurds by starting Kurdish language broadcasts on state-run TV, while allowing continuing legal harassment of Kurdish politicians for speaking in Kurdish.

18. (C) AKP has responded with typical bravado. PM Erdogan told reporters February 8 that CHP was too late in coming around to the realities of Turkey; its efforts to court pious voters was insincere at best. AKP Konya mayor Tahir Akyurek told us February 10 that CHP's Koran and chador initiatives were "shallow and hypocritical" because CHP had accused AKP of Islamic fundamentalism repeatedly in the past and had championed the Constitutional Court case to close down AKP due to allegations that the party was too religious. He noted that CHP's initiative to court veiled women collapsed in 87 days; the headscarved women quit en masse when their favored candidate was not nominated to run for mayor of Istanbul's Eyyup district. AKP's Sahin told us that CHP's and Saadet's efforts were "artificial attempts to gain votes." AKP's outreach, in contrast, was a continuation of the party's founding philosophy of welcoming people from all backgrounds and views -- Kurds, Alevis, women, the very pious, and fervent secularists.

Comment

19. (C) In hopes of lifting their vote count in this crucial local election, political parties across the spectrum have begun a desperate scramble to attract undecided voters -- approximately one-fifth of the electorate according to recent polls. The clawing for votes has led parties to craft new images to attract historical opponents: staunchly secular Alevis in the case of AKP; devout Muslims for CHP; secularists for Saadet, and moderates for once ultra-nationalist MHP. These efforts to reduce voters' suspicion and fear of their traditional opponents will mostly cancel each other out, and will take a back seat to issues of

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traditional import: personalities of candidates and performance on provision of local services. But over time, the tactics that are now largely perceived here as campaign gimmicks could play a critical role in softening the sharp ideological edges of political parties, speeding societal acceptance of heretofore marginal groups, and ultimately strengthening Turkish democracy.

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Jeffrey